

Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention
Network
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Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

As an active member of Rural Australians for Refugees and a people involved in supporting an Afghan refugee family and a Sudanese refugee in our community we would like to make the following points to the Joint Select Committee.

- We query the necessity of incarcerating asylum seekers for extended periods. The young Afghan man whom our community has been involved in supporting was detained on Nauru for three and half years, totally unable to communicate with his family who were sheltering in Pakistan. He knew nothing of the death of one of his children and the birth of another—his wife was pregnant before he was forced to flee. He was denied refugee status at first despite having been the victim of an attack on his family which took the life of his younger brother in an explosion in the family owned shop. He was then targeted by a bomb which took his right leg and right eye. Nevertheless the system deemed him not a refugee. Since that time another of his brothers was shot and killed and his wife's father, also shot and killed by the Taliban. Recently two nephews were shot and killed. His time isolated on Nauru caused him much anxiety for which he is still being treated seven years later. He has been told that he will probably need mental health care for the rest of his life. This detention occurred under the Howard government.
- The Labor government was elected with the promise of more humane treatment of asylum seekers. Initially this seemed to be occurring, but it now seems caught in the same trap as the previous one. That is, that the voices of people who humbly request that human rights considerations be given to the huddled masses who come to ask our help are not listened to—only those voices that, having ignored the evidence that Australia is not being overwhelmed by the small numbers of people who make it here—are willing to employ racist or xenophobic slogans to influence government policies. Why

are the voices of those of us who advocate a more reasonable and more humane policy not listened to?

- Malcolm Fraser indicated in a recent talk that he suspected that the long delay in releasing people already recognized as refugees was the consequence of waiting until ASIO was satisfied that they were acceptable. This often takes a very long time and the secrecy which these checks rely on means that some people are rejected but are never able to find out why. This was true of two young men held on Nauru for many years. Eventually one was so traumatized by his incarceration that he was medically evacuated to Australia. The other was accepted for resettlement by Sweden. Many of the asylum seekers have come from warring states and will have had a confused and difficult time before boarding a boat. If this, or the fact that many have no official papers because of the difficulty or impossibility of obtaining them from a hostile –or non functioning government— we should find a humane way to deal with these complications and not continue to abuse and imprison people for extended periods. The secrecy inherent in the current program should be modified and people who are being investigated but who are otherwise considered to be refugees should be allowed to live in the community.
- Two possible improvements to the present situation might be to allow Human Rights advocates to live in or daily inspect the detention centres to monitor conditions and witness the treatment of inmates first hand. Remote centres should be closed and people living in them brought to more central places. Another improvement would be to expedite the assessment of asylum seekers so that they are detained for only a very short period of, at most, four weeks.
- It is clear that Australia is not being inundated by refugees and asylum seekers. The small island of Lampedusa, for example, with a population of about 4000 has recently had an influx of 40,000 people from Tunisia. Italy, Spain, Turkey and Kenya all are dealing with displaced and desperate people—far more than we in Australia with all our prosperity. We need a more sensible approach worldwide and Australia needs to approach this issue more rationally.
- If the 'Malaysian solution' has the effect of changing the laws in Malaysia to a more humane way of treating refugees, it might actually do some good. Our taking of 4000 from

Malaysia is a good start and might, on its own, give asylum seekers the prompt to stay there and wait for Australian assessment there. Our sending to Malaysia of 800 poor souls is a retrograde step. Please bring Human Rights principles to this issue.

Thank you,

Ellen O'Gallagher and Rosemary McKenry

Castlemaine, Rural Australians for Refugees